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Why Did Portugal Enter PISA? Divergent Political Views, the National Agenda and the OECD Push

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reexamine the decision-making process on Portugal's entry into PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). The analysis indicates that the decision, which was not unanimous among the government members with responsibilities in the education field, was made in a context of normative emulation, with the goal of strengthening a specific direction of the national educational agenda.

Introduction

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), promoted by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), has acquired increasing influence in the orientation of education policies and in national reform processes (e.g., Acosta, 2020; Białecki et al., 2017; Candido et al., 2020; Engel, 2015; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Niemann, 2016; Normand, 2023; Pereyra et al., 2011; Zhao, 2020).

Although there is widespread recognition that PISA can provide useful information, there has been, in parallel with the “general consensus on the informative value of PISA data at the national and international levels” (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018, p. 347), a growing critique in the academic community centered on technical and methodological issues related to PISA's conceptualization and implementation. This critique includes issues concerning statistical approaches and procedures applied to scales and constructs, responses rates, sampling and the representation of participating populations (e.g., Eivers, 2010; Jerrim, 2021; Schuelka, 2013; Sjøberg, 2015). The critique also extends to interpretation issues, including the construction of its own research discourse, culture fairness, and bias in translation and language effects (e.g., Bart, 2022; El Masri et al., 2016; Nardi, 2008; Solano-Flores & Milbourn, 2016; Takayama, 2018).

As regards the scope of the increasing global influence of PISA on educational debate and policy, research highlights the importance of PISA in the emergence of a broader trend toward measurement, standardization, and accountability in education (e.g., Grek, 2009; Jacobsen & Young, 2013; Jarke & Breiter, 2019; Ozga, 2013; Sellar et al., 2017; Teltemann & Jude, 2019).

Sellar and Lingard (2013) recognize that, despite PISA's influence in the “constitution of a global policy field in education created through numbers, statistics and data” (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p. 917), there is no straightforward diffusion of OECD policy prescriptions for a two-fold reason: the countries that take part in PISA not only have the capacity to mediate OECD policy

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recommendations, but they are also involved in agenda-setting within the OECD and at each stage of the OECD's committee and review processes.

Bonal and Tarabini (2013) differentiated between the direct and indirect influences of the OECD. The direct effects are observable in policies and programs implemented as a consequence of the results of students' performance or of recommendations from the OECD itself. On the other hand, the indirect effects are less clear-cut, with policymakers referring to PISA as a generic framework of analysis, with a view to legitimizing new policies or programs. In this legitimization effort, other researchers (e.g., Ringarp, 2016; Santos & Centeno, 2021; Stray & Wood, 2020) highlight the perception of the term "international" as having more legitimacy. They emphasize the role that PISA and other International Large Scales Assessments (ILSAs) play in backing political decisions about the reform or maintenance of education policies. These assessments are seen as robust technical tools, and are thus supposedly neutral and credible sources of knowledge and evidence. Besides this role, Benveniste (2002), posits that ILSAs ought to be perceived as "a political phenomenon that reflects the agendas, tensions, and nature of power relations between political actors" (Benveniste, 2002, p. 89). Similarly, Pons (2016) identifies the political conditions, conflicts among political factions and the shaping of political leaders' agendas as the key elements to understand the public stances of policy actors on a subject.

In relation to the research conducted in Portugal on the influence of PISA on education policies, studies have followed four main lines of inquiry, consistent with the categorization of international research on the topic (e.g., Domínguez et al., 2012; Hernández-Torrano & Courtney, 2021; Hopfenbeck et al., 2018). First, they have analyzed Portugal in comparison with other European countries (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2011; Carvalho & Costa, 2014). Second, they have examined the specific case of Portugal as an individual country (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2017; Fernandes et al., 2019). Third, they have reflected on the mechanisms that have allowed PISA to affect education policies, particularly with the use of the so-called soft power/soft policy mechanisms (e.g., Carvalho, 2017). Fourth, they have studied how PISA data, provided by an external authority such as the OECD, have led to the implementation of data-driven policies, facilitated the production of knowledge, and guided and shaped education policies in Portugal (e.g., Afonso & Costa, 2009; Carvalho, 2009, 2012, 2018).

However, no current projects investigate the factors that influenced the political decision to include Portugal in the PISA. This study aims to reconstruct that process, spanning from when the 13th Portuguese Government assumed power in 1995, to 2001 when the outcomes of the initial participation of Portuguese students in this international survey were made public. To achieve this, we first present theoretical and empirical insights regarding the reasons behind governments' involvement with international large-scale assessments in the next section. After outlining the methodological framework, we discuss the Portuguese case, providing historical context for: i) the OECD's presence in Portugal as part of the technical assistant initiatives of international organizations; ii) the reestablishment of external evaluation via national exams; and iii) the hybrid nature which marked the definition of education policies at the national level during the period under investigation.

Next, we present our research findings in two sections: first, those related to the political decision, and second, those stemming from the government program to parliamentary debates. In the concluding section we provide final thoughts on the factors that contributed to Portugal's involvement in PISA, and identify the limitations of this study, and highlight potential future implications of this research.

Reasons for Governments' Engagement with ILSAs

Countries participate in ILSAs for a range of reasons. From a theoretical perspective, Verger (2016) notes that the PISA, lauded as a testament to what works (or does not work) in education, which can be used as benchmark, or valid instrument to assess the performance of an education system, follows a rationalist approach. On the other hand, normative emulation, conceptualizes the spread of global educational policy, primarily, as a process of State legitimization. Countries

adopt global policies within the context of a ritual of belonging (Addey & Sellar, 2019), to stand before the international community as modern, responsible, and credible states, who value public education, accountability and transparency as factors of progress and social development.

Numerous empirical studies have attempted to discern the motivations behind countries' involvement in ILSAs. DeBoer (2015), for instance, suggests that a country's approach to these international studies is influenced by the significance of assessment within its educational system. Lockeed et al. (2015) deduce that previous experience with other ILSAs enhances a country's propensity to participate in the PISA. Kamens and McNeely (2010) posit that testing is increasingly perceived as a national obligation, and the acceptance of international testing could indicate that national political elites are prepared to partake in an international integrative ritual, which further integrates them and their countries into the global polity. Kijima and Lipsy (2023) observe that participation might be motivated by an aspiration to mimic affluent countries or regional counterparts. According to Addey and Sellar (2017, 2019) countries participate in ILSAs with the intention to generate evidence for policy, build technical capacity, secure financial aid, strengthen international relations, address or shape their national political agendas, guide economic growth, and inform curriculum and pedagogy.

Additionally, Addey and Sellar (2017, 2019) emphasize the significance of the context in which decisions are made, the potential alterations in the guiding principles of political decisions that may occur during each country's participation process, the importance of the participation process itself, besides the gains in data/information. They also point out that countries typically do not rely on a single reason or cause, but rather a combination of reasons or causes.

Regarding the nature of international large-scale surveys such as PISA as policy tools, Verger et al. (2018, p. 20) pointed out that, among other aspects, they are politically rewarding, and malleable, stating that "enacting quality assurance and accountability systems in education allows politicians to signal to their publics that they are working seriously towards education change and that they are concerned about education quality".

Methodological Framework

From a methodological point of view, the emphasis was laid on a qualitative approach (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Schut, 2019) used as an iterative process in which both deduction and induction were involved, "carried out in relation to empirical material, previous research, and thus in relation to theory" (Aspers & Corte, 2019, p. 155), and centered on the analysis of the available documents on Portugal's participation in PISA. These documents were sourced from open-access official and public sources, encompassing both primary and secondary sources: first, a range of literature composed of Portuguese and English publications; second, legal documents gathered from from *Diário da República*, the Portuguese Electronic Journal database (e.g., decree-laws, regulatory decrees, Ministerial Orders), government programs, presentation speeches and parliamentary debates held with the political parties around it. It also included other debates on education policies or general policies that involved this subject, owing to requests for the Government to attend the Parliament¹ and retrieved from the databases of the Portuguese Parliament.

To guarantee the quality of this collection, we established criteria for external evaluation, focusing on the authenticity, credibility and representativeness of the gathered documents, as well as their significance, pertinence, and relevance to the knowledge we sought to construct (Robinson, 2010; Tight, 2019). We analyzed these documents using documental observation. This

¹Portuguese praxis dictates that political parties represented in Parliament have the right to request that discussions on general or sectoral policy issues be included in the agenda. This compels the government officials accountable for these areas to participate in the Parliamentary session and respond to criticisms of their policies.

internal analysis enabled us to encapsulate the primary characteristics of the document, connect them to secondary aspects, and infer how ideas are related.

In addition to examining these preexisting documents, we used data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews for triangulation purposes (Green & Chian, 2018; Morgan, 2022). We conducted these interviews with key government officials who regularly attended OECD meetings during the period under investigation, and with leaders involved in the coordination of the first Portuguese participation in PISA who agreed to participate in our study. We designed the interview questions to probe the political context and conditions that influenced Portugal's decision to participate in PISA. The interviews, which occurred in 2019, ranged from 150–180 minutes in duration. We recorded and transcribed all interviews.

The interviewees received the transcriptions, which allowed them to revise, rectify, or clarify the information they provided during the initial interview. This step was deemed beneficial in affirming the authenticity of the transcripts and in verifying that the transcribed words accurately represented the interviewees' statements (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). The interviewees explicitly gave their consent to be identified by their names.

We coded the interviews based on theoretical concepts, as well as overarching themes or conceptual macro aggregates identified within the texts. We present our interpretation of these data in this document, exemplified by selected excerpts from the interviews.

Putting the Portuguese Case into Perspective

The Influence of International Organizations: The OECD's Presence

The recent educational history of Portugal highlights a strong correlation between the development of educational policies and the reliance on aid from international institutions. This pattern was evident in the postwar period, starting from the 1950s, with the involvement of the OECD (originally established as the OEEC, or Organization for European Economic Co-operation). The OECD's presence coincided with a phase of school expansion and increasing importance placed on education in generating the human capital necessary for the projects of the *developmentalist* sector of the dictatorship.²

Following the April Revolution, in 1974 and 1975, dialogue with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), was initiated in response to the democratizing concerns of the educational reforms of this period. After 1976, within a context of legally formalized democratic stability, Portugal prioritized its relations with the World Bank. This shift marked the return of planning for skilled labor requirements as a driving force in educational policy.

The resurgence of the OECD's prominent role occurred in the early 1980s, following the Portuguese government's decision to seek inclusion in the group of OECD countries participating in the examination of national education policies.³

The relationship between the development of education policies and the use of international institutions operates on two levels: first, national authorities actively seek foreign technical assistance as a means of legitimizing their chosen education policy options; second, ongoing activities such as seminars, conferences, workshops, studies, and publications significantly contribute to the standardization of national education policies. They not only define the priorities, but also set a relatively explicit mandate by the way they publicly present and discuss the issues. This dual-level operation reflects the two methods the OECD uses to shape political decisions. On one hand, it governs by coordination, uniting various actors in shared initiatives. On the other hand, it shapes opinion “at

²For more details on the OEEC/OECD's role in the construction of education policies in Portugal after World War II up to the April Revolution, in 1974, see Teodoro (2020).

³For more details on this examination of Portugal's education policy conducted by the OECD, see Teodoro and Lopo (2021).

the level of ideas, framing problematizations and recommendations on the education systems” (Carvalho, 2016, p. 680), capable of influencing the national discourses on education policies.

The Reintroduction of National Exams

In Portugal, national exams, with the two-fold purpose of certifying the completion of secondary education⁴ and of accessing higher education, were reinstated in 1993. As was explained in the legislative order, which formalized this decision:

The external assessment is the responsibility of the Minister of Education and aims to contribute to the national homogeneity of secondary education grades, enabling this level of schooling to be concluded and its respective grade to be determined (...). In the courses oriented to further studies, the external assessment will consist in final exams, at national level.⁵

As noted by Fernandes (2014, pp. 32–33) “after 1995/1996, the system to assess students’ learning by means of national exams would not cease to have a significant effect on the Portuguese education system”.

Still, the implementation of the external assessment faced several difficulties: one of the national high-stake exams had to be deferred in July 1995, during the tenure of the 12th Government,⁶ owing to a teachers’ strike. In the same exam, one of the tasks was structured incorrectly. The decision was made to award the highest possible score for this task. Extra spots were established in the competition for higher education entry to try and lessen the disparity created between the students who took this test and received the bonus grade, and those who did not. This decision was approved by the Portuguese Parliament, but was deemed illegal by the Constitutional Court.

In the following year, now with the 13th Government⁷ in power, the examination texts were once again riddled with errors and omissions, along with other issues that were exacerbated by the transition of executives, such as the failure to distribute corrections or to adhere to grace periods. In response to the subpar performance of Portuguese students, the government opted to introduce a special policy for determining the final scores of subjects with a national exam. This policy resulted in an additional two points being added to the average grade of all students who completed secondary education in the 1995–1996 academic year. Addressing these issues in Parliament, the incumbent Minister of Education, Eduardo Marçal Grilo, provided the following explanation:

It has been 17 years since national exams of such magnitude were last “set up” (...). A truly gigantic machine was created: 140,000 students, 600 schools, more than 60,000 teachers charged with monitoring the exams, more than 162 exams to be produced, more than 500 exams taken. (Portugal, 1996a, p. 3330)

The Minister also argued that it was “necessary to professionalize the process of making exams” and that this would only be possible “with a dedicated office, with its own responsibility”

⁴Secondary education includes three grades: 10th grade, 11th grade and 12th (the last) grade. The syllabi of secondary education correspond to level 3 of ISCED.

⁵Portuguese Ministry of Education, Despacho Normativo 338/93 [1993], p. 5935 <<https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/668953>>.

⁶The 12th Constitutional Government was formed based on the outcomes of the Portuguese legislative elections conducted on October 6, 1991. In the elections, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) secured an absolute majority in Parliament with 135 Members of Parliament (MPs). Additionally, four other political parties gained parliamentary representation: The Socialist Party (PS), with 72 MPs, the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), with 17 MPs, the Social Democratic Centre (CDS), with five MPs, and lastly, the National Solidarity Party (PSN), with one MP. In terms of their positions on the political spectrum, if we consider a left–right division, the PSD would occupy the center-right position, with the CDS to its right. The PS would be on the center-left, and the PCP would be positioned clearly to its left.

⁷The 13th Constitutional Government was formed based on the outcomes of the elections conducted on October 1, 1995. These elections provided the PS with a relative majority, represented by 112 elected MPs, and granted parliamentary representation to three other political parties: the PSD, with 88 elected MPs, and both the CDS and the PCP, which campaigned in alliance with the PEV-Green Ecological Party, each securing 15 elected MPs.

(Portugal, 1996b, p. 3331). So, in 1997, a central service of the Ministry of Education was created, albeit endowed with administrative autonomy – the Office for Education Assessment (GAVE, as per the Portuguese acronym). This office was tasked with executive duties to plan, coordinate, develop, and validate the instruments of summative assessment of students. Within its jurisdiction, it also coordinated Portugal's initial and subsequent participation in PISA. It should be noted that this was the first time a structure dedicated to the evaluation of students' learning had been created in Portugal. In 1996, prior to its formal establishment, a taskforce was created under the purview of the Secretary of State for Education and Innovation. This taskforce was designed to implement such functions and promptly began preparing exams. Glória Ramalho, who later assumed the role of Director of GAVE, led this working group.

The Hybridity of the Discourses on Education Policy

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, many regions globally, particularly in the Western world, experienced an intensification of globalization. This process involved the promotion of universally accepted educational concepts tied to modernization efforts. These efforts deemed the provision of a workforce with appropriate qualifications as crucial for economic expansion.

Since the 1980s, when Portugal's integration into the European community was accepted as an external force driving the country's development⁸, the primary reference in Portugal in the direction of education policies and the discourses justifying them has demonstrated a hybrid nature, despite being shaped by an ideology of modernization rooted in economics. This points to a variety of heterogeneous decisions.

Magalhães and Stoer (1998) ascribe that discursive hybridity to the existence of two simultaneous views on the function of mass schooling. The first perspective sees it as a path to emancipation, while the second connects the knowledge imparted during the educational process to job performance, thereby preparing students for the labor market through the development of cognitive skills. Furthermore, Correia (1999) argues that a "semantic reconversion" started in the 1980s, where the combination of education and modernization of productive fabric, emphasizing efficiency, quality standards, and job-related training, tends to surpass the combination of education and democracy. This modernization gains legitimacy, in discourse terms, through two primary issues: diversifying educational offerings and that of equal opportunities, and the involvement of businesses in local training offerings. This is done following a management logic grounded in meritocracy and the practical use of school knowledge.

Along the same lines, Afonso (1998) highlights a conflict between two opposing objectives: first, the goals of a welfare state, which predicates its growth on the democratization and expansion of equal opportunities for educational access; and second, a neoliberal inclination, or a softened educational neoliberalism. This neoliberal tendency is "generated by the contradictory pressures brought to bear by the different social groups and classes that participated, whether directly or indirectly, in the definition of the education policy" (Afonso, 1998, p. 232). This results in the shrinking of the welfare state, deregulation, the privatization of education, and in an increase in school oversight through national exams.

However, it was in the 1990s that the hybrid nature of the education policy became more apparent. As Teodoro and Aníbal (2007) point out:

Regardless of the insistence in concepts of equality of opportunities and inclusion (...) the constant references that ally education to development – in a homogenized and universal logic of modernization – reveal the existence of continuity of the fundamental parameters of educational policy. As a consequence, a hybrid orientation that associates constructivist-like speeches in a critical perspective with apologetic

⁸The Treaty of Accession of Portugal into the European Economic Community (EEC) was signed on June 12, 1985, and the country was officially integrated within the group on January 1, 1986.

discourses of social efficiency that links the utility of education to economic productivity is developed. (Teodoro & Aníbal, 2007, p. 111)

This hybrid nature is what holds the discourse against a competency-based curriculum captive. As knowledge becomes a central factor in production, the competency concept tends to align with market needs. If limited to this role of linking education with the labor world, the competency-based curriculum, initially introduced in schools as part of a constructivist model promoting reflective and emancipatory learning, transforms into a regulatory model. This model focuses on specialization and outcome control, which solidified in Portugal in the 1990s. As previously mentioned, this was when external evaluation through nationwide final exams became institutionalized.

Research Findings

The Political Decision

The Portuguese daily newspaper *Público*, in an article entitled “O folhetim da participação portuguesa” (The soap opera of Portuguese participation) reported that the OECD had been informed that the Portuguese would not participate in PISA. The article quoted Ana Benavente, who served as Secretary of State for Education and Innovation from 1995 to 2001, and her statement that Portugal would participate “in everything, in all preparatory meetings” (Sanches, 2001, p. 35), only students would not take the tests. In other words, Portugal would not compare with the OECD partners until 2003. On the postponement of the Portuguese participation, according to the same newspaper, “unions, parents and students protested” (Sanches, 2001, p. 35). In 1999, PISA was back in the news, this time to announce that Portugal would participate in the pilot-tests and that, as the then director of GAVE, Glória Ramalho, explained, “in 2000 the decision would be taken if the country was really going to participate in the mega-survey” (Sanches, 2001, p. 35).

Although Portugal would indeed eventually participate in the first PISA cycle, which took place in 2000, this newspaper article illustrates the tensions which reverberated in the public space, and which involved the political decision with respect to Portugal’s participation. The doubts regarding this participation are mentioned in an interview with the Minister of Education involved in the first PISA cycle, Eduardo Marçal Grilo, retrieved by Carvalho et al. (2017, p. 156):

Initially there was [in the Ministry] on the part of some sectors a reaction, I would say, negative regarding PISA (...). I do not say that there were large sectors who were against an international comparison, what I think is that maybe there was the idea of: “First, let’s try to create conditions and solve some problems that are apparently easy to solve, and then we move forward.”

Regarding the process which led to the Portuguese participation, Ana Benavente, who served as the Secretary of State for Education from 1995–2001 and participated in the preliminary meetings with the OECD for the PISA implementation, explained as follows:

It was a slow process and there were more countries against [it]. But, later, when it’s time for a decision, it is up to the Prime Ministers of governments to decide. They override the Ministries of Education, which were represented there (...). I came back [from the OECD] having voted against. PISA did not bring intelligence either to schools or to education. When I arrived in Portugal, a commotion had broken out in the Ministry of Education, with some saying: (...) “we cannot remain out of it” (...). And then, of course, the situation was intolerable, and I could not defend it, since I was the only one who had voted against it. (A. Benavente, personal interview, March 6, 2019)

Ana Benavente credits the choice for Portugal to join PISA to Eduardo Marçal Grilo, the Minister of Education of the ruling government in 1999. Along with Guilherme d’Oliveira Martins, the Secretary of State for Educational Administration, they both supported Portugal’s

participation. As Ana Benavente noted, they “were in favor of us going with the others. We could never be left out” (A. Benavente, personal interview, March 6, 2019).

Similarly, Glória Ramalho, director of GAVE, the entity which, as we saw, coordinated the first Portuguese participation in PISA as well as the subsequent cycles, and who was in 2002 Vice Chair of the Board of Participating Countries (BPC),⁹ stated that the decision to participate in PISA was a “bid pushed by the OECD” (G. Ramalho, personal interview, May 6, 2019).

Regarding the reasons which led her to take on an opposing position, Ana Benavente explained that:

I had an argument that (...) I still consider to be valid: Portugal had already participated in a number of surveys¹⁰ (...) and never did anything with those results. I mean, the results (...) that showed the country had some problems in some area or another, we had never seen that translated into policies. (A. Benavente, personal interview, March 6, 2019)

From the Government Program to Parliamentary Debates

The Socialist Party’s 13th government, holding a relative majority,¹¹ assumed power on October 28, 1995. The government program was introduced and discussed in the Portuguese Parliament in November 1995. António Guterres, who was the Prime Minister at that time and is currently the Secretary General of the United Nations, forecast the set of benefits expected of the educational policy to be pursued: “to ensure education for all for all, economic progress and equal opportunities, quality and justice in the education system, participation and a sense of responsibility, as generators of strictness and rigor” (Portugal, 1995a, p. 9).

Furthermore, Eduardo Marçal Grilo, the Minister of Education, stressed the role of education in promoting social efficiency. In his speech, he interwove the themes of education and development, justifying the priority given to education as “a requirement of the open society of knowledge and information we live in, in which personal qualifications constitute the best comparative advantages” (Portugal, 1995b, p. 114).

He presented democratization and excellence as two faces of the same coin, and discussed the anticipated effects of the proposed educational policy, namely, enhancing the fairness, quality, and efficiency of the educational process. These benefits would be achieved through a range of functionalist strategies, such as duplicating successful practices from schools recognized as centers of excellence, establishing an independent education evaluation system (with expert assessors) to publicly share the results, setting new standards of rigor and quality in private and cooperative education, and delegating responsibilities (to municipalities and administrative regions). This delegation is intended to bring the Administration closer to “efficiency, accountability and proximity to the citizens” (Portugal, 1995b, p. 114).

In November 1996, in the debate on educational policy sparked off by questions to the government, Eduardo Marçal Grilo, the Minister of Education, emphasized, with respect to education quality, that it was not possible to measure “only with local indicators, rather we need international indicators where we are compared with the others” (Portugal, Assembleia da

⁹The BPC is currently called the PISA Governing Board on which OECD members and PISA associates, and partner economies are represented.

¹⁰Ana Benavente was talking of Portugal’s participation in several international surveys conducted from 1988 to 1992. These surveys aimed to assess the level of literacy in reading, mathematics and sciences. Examples of these studies include the “Characterization of the Literacy Level of the Portuguese School Population” and “Reading Literacy”, both conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The Educational Testing Service (ETS), National Science Foundation (NSF), and Carnegie Corporation conducted the Second International Assessment of Educational Progress. Note that Portugal also participated in the international comparative assessment surveys, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Civic Education Study, both conducted by the IEA, up until 2000. This year marked Portugal’s first participation in the PISA.

¹¹See note 6.

República, 1996b, p. 508). Conversely, Guilherme d'Oliveira Martins, the Secretary of State for Educational Administration, advocated for a tight integration among education, qualification, and employment.

The substance of these discourses suggest their alignment with the hybridity that has typified education policies since the 1980s (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016; Maroy, 2009). This is also evident in the discourses justifying these policies in Portugal, where there is a coexistence of approaches. These approaches combine discourses with a constructivist slant from a critical viewpoint, and discourses advocating social efficiency. In these discourses, the value of education is linked to modernization and economic competitiveness.

Concluding Remarks

The leadership of the Socialist Party, who held power from 1995–2002, aimed to differentiate themselves from the preceding education policy implemented under the Social Democratic Party. Primarily, they achieved this through a shift in rhetoric that highlighted, first, the social focus of the government's interests, and second, the national consensus on education policy and involvement as a cornerstone for democratization. However, despite the emphasis on equal opportunities and inclusion, the recurring links between education and development, within a unifying framework of universal modernization, suggest the presence of continuities in the fundamental aspects of the education policies.

The debates about Portugal's involvement in PISA likely mirror these mixed discursive perspectives, which are backed by the contradictions between leaders advocating for critical constructivism and those supporting social efficiency. These debates align with the results of other research, specifically studies carried out from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, regarding the rise of political discourse on educational priority within the context of modernization ideology (e.g., Afonso, 1998; Correia et al., 2012).

This discourse incorporates references to structural deficiencies, centered in the production subsystem, that

having been produced in its past, are visible when that system is compared with countries of the center which, because it is assumed that they do not have such deficiencies and possess a more developed innovation potential, are seen as more modern and perfect social systems. The socioeconomic systems of the countries of the center are, therefore, considered unquestionable models to emulate. (Correia et al., 2012, p. 176)

In terms of implementing educational policies, the focus was about usefulness (Auld & Morris, 2014; Cowen, 1996) and the adjustment required to modernize the economy by training and qualifying human resources for a competitive regional workforce, which is influenced by forces beyond national boundaries (Brown & Lauder, 1996; Silova et al., 2020) particularly following Portugal's integration into the European Community.

European integration, by acting as exogenous driver of the country's development, at the same time fostered the adaptation to the imperatives defined by the more developed societies (Petrella, 1990). Thus, a window of opportunity opened for Portugal for the affirmation in another forum of developed economies of the priority given to education and for a "political push" (Acosta, 2020, p. 97) of a national educational agenda.

This situation aligns with two aspects highlighted by Addey and Sellar (2017, 2019) that we underscore: first, pressure to engage in global education policy has often been dichotomized between internal and external factors, although both domestic and international political factors play some role; second, participation in PISA was used by several countries for international relation purposes, including to align with the international community's values or to seek recognition. Statements like "we cannot remain out of it", or that it is impossible to gauge the quality of education "only with local indicators, rather we need international indicators where we are compared with the others" from the interviews and discourses we examined, serve as examples that illustrate these two forms of normative emulation.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the narratives of the interviewees, the impulse given by the OECD, to make this participation in PISA happen, is aligned with other studies regarding the importance of the use by the OECD of an informal authority based on peer pressure as encouragement to the countries' participation in PISA (e.g., Bieber & Martens, 2011; Hajisoteriou & Neophytou, 2020; Liesner, 2012; Woodward, 2009). This is also consistent with the sense of urgency (Meyer, 2014) associated with this decision.

Moreover:

In some cases, non-participation may not be a real option, even when data is not relevant to a country's specific education challenges. For example, high-level policy actors in European countries have argued that economic status imposed participation and that non-participation would send a signal that a country was not sufficiently committed to improving education. (Addey et al., 2017, p. 7)

Reflecting on the insights of Verger (2016), and the justifications countries provide for their involvement in an ILSA, as proposed by Kamens and McNeely (2010) and Addey and Sellar (2017, 2019), our findings indicate that Portugal's decision to participate in the PISA was made within a context of normative emulation. In other words, a situation in which the government, through its spokesman, the Minister of Education, wanted to present itself before the international community as modern, committed to the country's development, and responsible, at the same time valuing the importance of externalizing before its OECD peers, the priority given to education. Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of assessing the quality of education, in which the external assessment of students' performance constituted an indicator already established in the national educational policy agenda.

This study primarily aimed to comprehend the motivations and elements that influenced the political decision to incorporate Portugal into PISA. Our research involved analyzing decree-laws, regulatory decrees, Ministerial Orders, Government programs, presentation speeches, parliamentary debates, and data from comprehensive interviews with key government officials and leaders who coordinated Portugal's initial participation in PISA. This approach provided a basis for preliminary conclusions. However, to establish more robust conclusions, further research is necessary, incorporating a broader spectrum of testimonies from opposition political parties, scientific and professional teacher associations, parent representatives, and trade unions. Future studies might also explore whether opting out of PISA participation was a viable choice for the Portuguese government in a global context where it is "difficult to imagine what forces would restrain the urge among national elites to assess and test" (Kamens & McNeely, 2010, p. 22).

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